



USDA Foreign Agricultural Service

GAIN Report

Global Agriculture Information Network

Template Version 2.09

Required Report - Public distribution

Date: 12/8/2008

GAIN Report Number: EI8003

Ireland

Sanitary/Phytosanitary/Food Safety

Dioxin in Pork spurs recall

2008

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Report Highlights:

Irish authorities have recalled all Irish pork and pigmeat due to the discovery of dioxin in meat samples. The contamination in the meat is believed to have originated from feedstuffs that include recycled bread and dough products. All consumers have been warned to not eat - and destroy - any pork containing products produced since September 1, 2008. Exports to a number of EU and non-EU markets including the U.S are also affected.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Annual Report
Dublin [E1]
[E1]

On December 6, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) ordered the withdrawal and recall from sale of all Irish pork products dating back to September 1, 2008. This follows on from the discovery of the presence of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), indicative of dioxin contamination, in pork-fat during routine food chain monitoring for a range of contaminants.

It is reported that the contamination was at levels between 80 and 200 times the safe limits. The contamination first came to light December 1, but at that stage was believed to be non-toxic. However the positive tests of the dioxin in the pork was confirmed on December 6. The public has been advised to destroy all pork products purchased since September 1, 2008. This was based on the Irish Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (DAFF) testing historic samples which enabled a specific cut-off date.

On discovery of the contamination, DAFF immediately started investigating the source of the contaminant. It appears that the feed originated from a single feed mill which recycles bread and uncooked bread dough into a biscuit-type product that makes its way into the feed. There is some suggestion that an industrial-oil, not suitable for human or animal consumption, had been used in the production of the animal-feed. However the feed-mill has explained that this oil is used in machinery maintenance only.

Further investigation found that the contaminated feed was used on a total of 47 farms in the Republic of Ireland. Nine of these farms were pig-producing farms. The remaining 38 farms were cattle (beef not dairy) farms, with one of those also producing pigs. The FSAI has advised that it is not necessary at this time to have a similar withdrawal of beef products.

Following the announcement of the recall, all retail stores in the Republic of Ireland removed pork and pork products from shop shelves. The European Commission said today that twelve EU countries and nine non-EU countries have been affected by the contamination scare. EU countries affected include the UK, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, Estonia, France, Portugal and Cyprus. Non-EU countries that have been impacted include the U.S., Japan, Russia, Singapore, Canada, Switzerland, China (including Hong Kong) and Korea.

Following the developments south of the border, on December 7, the UK Government's Food Standards Agency (FSA) issued a warning to UK consumers not to eat Irish or Northern Irish pork or pork products. Not only is there substantial cross border movement of both live animals and meat products between the two countries but official sources report that eight farms in Northern Ireland - of which two are pig-producing farms - have also been directly affected by the contaminated feed.

The Republic of Ireland produced 205,000 metric tons of pigmeat in 2007. According to trade statistics, 90,413 metric tons of fresh, chilled and frozen products was exported while an additional 26,100 metric tons of products containing pigmeat was also exported.

In 2007, Ireland exported 1,380 tons of fresh, frozen or chilled pigmeat to the U.S. In the same year, the UK exported 3,411 tons to the US with about half of this tonnage originating in Northern Ireland.

The Irish authorities have stated that commercial processing of pigmeat, which has ceased nationwide, will resume as soon as possible. They have assured consumers that any pork delivered to the market will be sourced from animals not fed with contaminated feed and will be labeled as production not affected by the withdrawal order. Pig slaughtering has also been temporarily halted in Northern Ireland.

This is the third dioxin in feed scandal in recent memory, the two most recent being in Chile and in Belgium. While the Irish Government's decision to instigate a full product recall is being applauded in many circles, others are questioning whether it is a proportionate response given the very low risk to human health.

Farmer producer groups as well as industry groupings have already called on the GOI for some emergency compensation fund for an industry valued at €400 million (\$500 million). Consumer demand in both the Republic of Ireland and U.K is likely to be met by imported product in the short-term, mainly intra-EU supplies such as Denmark. Questions are also already being raised as to what impact this may have on the long term future of the Irish pork sector which was already suffering from production cost difficulties.